

# 1 in 4 JUULvapor tweeps is underage

October 19 2018

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E-cigarette brand JUUL's Twitter handle is attracting adolescents to the point that at least a quarter of its followers appear to be under age 18, according to a new analysis by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.

Many of these minors—to whom it is illegal to sell nicotine-delivery products—are retweeting JUUL's messages, amplifying its advertisements to a vulnerable population. The study results are published today in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"JUUL representatives have said the company is not trying to target adolescents with their advertising or sales, but our research clearly indicates that a sizeable proportion of their Twitter audience is exactly this population," said lead author Kar-Hai Chu, Ph.D., assistant professor of medicine in Pitt's Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health. "This is highly concerning because adolescents exposed to [e-cigarette](#) marketing are more likely to use e-cigarettes and, in turn, young adults who use e-cigarettes are four times as likely as their non-vaping peers to transition to smoking traditional tobacco cigarettes."

JUUL (pronounced "jewel") is an e-cigarette that resembles a flash drive and can be plugged into a computer to recharge. A "pod" of e-liquid containing nicotine is loaded into the JUUL and heated, with the user inhaling the vapor. JUUL vapor contains about double the concentration of nicotine found in other e-cigarettes and comes in several youth-friendly flavors, including mango and fruit medley.

There is evidence that adolescents, whose brains are still developing, are more susceptible to nicotine addiction than adults. Nine out of every 10 cigarette smokers started before age 18, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Chu and his colleagues launched the analysis after noticing that JUUL was particularly appealing to teens, and those teens were using [social media](#) to discuss how to obtain it and hide using it while in school. Using terms like "juuling" and customizing the appearance of the devices have also become part of youth culture. Twitter has a gateway feature that can perform age screening and discourage underage followers—many

alcohol brands employ it—but JUUL isn't using it.

The research team collected 3,239 tweets from JUUL's official Twitter account, @JUULvapor, for a year between February 2017 and January 2018. These tweets were retweeted 1,124 times by 721 unique Twitter users. Trained human coders examined each of the user's Twitter profiles to determine if the individual was under age 18. If the user shared an age, that made the job easy. If not, the coders looked for clues—such as if the user mentioned a grade level or an age-specific event, like, "I'm excited about my upcoming sweet 16." If there was any doubt, the user was labeled an adult.

When a person retweets, the original tweet is shared with all of that person's followers, even if none of them follows the handle that issued the original tweet. In the JUUL tweets that the researchers examined, some were retweeted in a chain that extended through four Twitter users.

"When this happens, the people seeing the retweet are getting it from a person, not a brand. It adds a level of normalization and buffers the viewers from the impersonal element of advertising, particularly if the person who retweeted it is a trusted friend or someone they aspire to be like," said Chu.

Public health agencies could execute similar social media analyses to find adolescent networks that are popularizing e-cigarette use and target counter-messaging to them, even going so far as to identify schools associated with the social media accounts of students who glamorize vaping and institute programs to prevent e-cigarette use, Chu said. Further research should be performed to determine if such preventive efforts are effective, he added.

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

Citation: 1 in 4 JUULvapor tweeps is underage (2018, October 19) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-10-juulvapor-tweeps-underage.html>

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